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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA CONTINUES TO BATTLE PHYSICAL REMINDERS OF WAR

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11. Summary: Nearly three decades of war and civil unrest have left Cambodia as one of the most heavily mined and explosive remnants of war (ERW) contaminated countries in the world. In addition to landmines, contamination includes cluster submunitions as well as abandoned explosive ordnance dropped by the United States during the secret bombing of Cambodia between 1969 and 1973. Over fifteen years of humanitarian demining has significantly reduced casualties due to mine and ERW accidents as well as the amount of contaminated and suspect land. However, some landmine experts estimate that roughly 700-1000 square kilometers are still heavily mined, creating a significant obstacle to post-conflict rehabilitation, poverty reduction, investment and long-term development. The international community will need to support humanitarian mine action activities at a sustained rate for several years before success is in sight. End Summary.

Troubled History

12. According to the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC), the North Vietnamese army laid the first landmines in Cambodia in 1967 and continued to do so throughout the Vietnamese War. The United States then began covert carpet-bombing operations in the late sixties. In the seventies, the Khmer Rouge as well as the Lon Nol regime used landmines to protect defensive perimeters and block borders. The Vietnamese invasion into Cambodia on January 7, 1979 did not end the conflict, with fighting continuing into the early nineties. The Vietnamese-backed government conscripted hundreds of thousands of Cambodians for perilous labor such as land clearance and mining through the Kor Pram project, better known as K5. Beginning in 1985, millions of mines were laid along the K5 mine belt) n approximately 700 kilometer barrier along the western and northern border with Thailand. United Nations deminers began the slow and dangerous task of clearing this area of mines beginning in 1992.

Addressing the Problem

13. Currently, three main humanitarian mine action (HMA) NGOs focus their efforts on the K5 mine belt in northwestern Cambodia, which has the greatest concentration of mines in the country. HALO Trust, Mines Advisory Group (MAG), and CMAC each fulfill a specific niche in the ongoing struggle to rid Cambodia of landmines. HALO is an expert in the field, and is known for its methodical and professional approach to landmine clearance. HALO focuses on the most densely mined areas, much of which is located in uninhabited forested areas of the border, and consistently has the highest numbers of mines cleared (per clearance worker and per unit area). Some observers, however, believe that more of an emphasis should be placed on the social-economic aspects of landmine and ERW

contamination. This is where MAG and CMAC's expertise come into play. Both NGOs work with the provincial Mine Action Planning Units (MAPUs) to select clearance areas based on social-economic impact to include land release, which ultimately frees land for farming and other productive use. MAG and CMAC also promote gender equality with females making up over 30 percent of their deminers. However, by concentrating on poverty alleviation and land release, MAG and CMAC end up clearing large swaths of land which may or may not have landmines, lowering their overall clearance productivity statistics.

Battle Area Clearance

14. During the secret bombing campaign of Cambodia from 1969-1973, the U.S. is reported to have dropped approximately half a million tons of bombs, littering the ground with over 26 million submunitions. Most were dropped in the eastern provinces where the Ho Chi Minh trail wound through Laos and Cambodia and into southern Vietnam. According to Handicap International, close to one third of these submunitions failed to explode, resulting in more than 8.5 million explosives scattered throughout the eastern portion of Cambodia. These unexploded remnants kill or injure more Cambodians annually than landmines. Poverty, the construction of highways and roads, and land migration has put more people on a collision path with ERW in these areas. Many villagers know where the ERW are and stay away, preventing them from safely using the land for agriculture or infrastructure. Poverty has forced others to take a chance, often farming the contaminated areas or collecting scrap metal and explosives from the submunitions to sell. Recently, CMAC has taken the lead to remove explosives in the eastern provinces and depending on funding, deploys one to

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ten units to clear the former battle areas.

Exporting Expertise

15. Since the beginning of the UNTAC period over 1 million mines and approximately 500 square kilometers have been cleared. After years of trial and error, Cambodia's demining expertise is now benefiting others worldwide. Last year, Afghan deminers spent several months in Cambodia, working side by side with trained HALO deminers to learn new techniques. In 2007, 135 Cambodian troops were sent to Sudan on a United Nations Peace Keeping Operation (PKO). Additional troops have rotated through on a yearly basis and several hundred others stand ready for emergency peacekeeping and demining missions.

Victims of Their Own Success

16. A new baseline survey will be conducted this year to better determine the extent of existing land contaminated by landmines and set area priorities for clearance. It is roughly estimated that approximately 700-1000 square kilometers of heavily contaminated land remains to be cleared (current rate of clearance is around 36 square kilometers per year). Landmine and ERW casualties have dramatically decreased from over 2000 annually in the early 1990's to 266 in 2008. However, it appears that the decrease in casualty numbers will be accompanied by a decrease in funding for HMA in Cambodia. International mine action funding to Cambodia was over \$30 million in 2007, with the U.S. State Department contributing approximately \$4 million. Poloff's discussion with other donors, including Japan, Australia, Germany and Canada, reveals that funding will begin to decrease and eventually phase out beginning in 2010. U.S. State Department funding will drop by over \$1 million in FY2010. A representative from the United Nations Development Program, which funds an oversight group for HMA activities in

Cambodia, recently stated that Cambodia will "require sustained external funding into the medium term" to overcome its landmine problem.

Vigilance

¶17. Even after 15 years of demining, Cambodia remains one of the most heavily mined countries in the world along with Afghanistan and Angola. A recent government survey found that over forty percent of the villages in Cambodia have a mine problem. Landmine and ERW accidents occur almost daily in a country where more than 40,000 people have lost limbs due to mine and ERW accidents. Cambodia suffers from one of the highest physical disability rates in the world and has no legislation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Mine and ERW survivors face economic hardships as a result of their disabilities, and tend to be among the poorest of the poor. Livelihood activities make up the majority of reasons causing the casualties, with young males and boys representing the group most affected. Although mine risk education is widespread, competition for land has become fierce. Landmines and ERW impede access to resources, including water and land for agriculture. Furthermore, they block access to roads, markets and basic social services such as schools and health clinics.

¶18. Comment: The above challenges will not disappear by 2010. The international mine action donor community will need to continue to support HMA at a sustained rate for the next several years to free Cambodia from the negative humanitarian and social-economic impacts of landmines and ERW. The Cambodian government and NGOs have endeavored to keep HMA in the spotlight to include several press articles and even a spot on the popular U.S. reality television show, In Harm's Way, late last year. In this context, post will continue to seek additional funding sources to augment the HMA budget for Cambodia. The Embassy hopes to secure similar funding in future years. Although a good deal of progress has been made, much more remains to be done. End Comment.

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